

July 7 , 2005 - State asks community help with ex-prisoners.

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Indiana Department of Correction Commissioner J. David Donahue addresses Offender Re-entry on Wednesday, July 6th at Indiana University Northwest at Town Hall Meeting.

*NOTE: Commissioner J. David Donahue kicked-off the first of nine town hall meetings in Indiana
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CRIME PREVENTION: Area groups meet with correction commissioner to expand offender re-entry programs

BY SHARON PORTA
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"There are sometimes good people who use poor judgment in their life, and they are coming out of jail...The failure typically occurs seven to 21 days after their release. If they don't get an opportunity to find work or housing by then, they look to other means. This is a society problem; these people need to connect with local resources."

J. David Donahue, Commissioner

GARY | Imagine being released from prison after 15 years, with \$50 and no car, home, job or drivers license, wearing prison clothes and getting only a wish of "good luck" from corrections officers.

J. David Donahue, commissioner of the Indiana Department of Correction, wants to change that through new prisoner re-entry programs aimed at reducing the percentage of people who return to correctional facilities.

Last year, 650,000 people were released from prisons across the country, 14,000 in Indiana. Of that number, Donahue said fewer than half stay out of trouble for three years. Yet, 97 percent of those in Indiana prisons eventually return to their communities.

Many local organizations, both faith- and community-based, work with ex-offenders. But more are

needed, according to Donahue, who said that any initiative to break the cycle of recidivism and help ex-offenders become productive citizens will require a communitywide response.

Indiana University Northwest's School of Public and Environmental Affairs and Lake County's corrections department and advisory board on Wednesday hosted the first in a series of meetings across the state on offender re-entry programs.

More than 100 members of law enforcement, adult education centers, state and community faith-based organizations attended. Donahue told them former prisoners need help in three key areas -- housing, employment and transportation.

"There are sometimes good people who use poor judgment in their life, and they are coming out of jail," Donahue said.

"The failure typically occurs seven to 21 days after their release. If they don't get an opportunity to find work or housing by then, they look to other means. This is a society problem; these people need to connect with local resources."

New model re-entry programs have been put in place by Donahue, who recently was appointed by Gov. Mitch Daniels. Prisoners will be re-evaluated and placed in less-restrictive environments to help their transition and to reduce the \$656 million spent annually on Indiana's prisons.

The need for such work release programs in Northwest Indiana is under discussion. There currently are two programs in Indianapolis and one in South Bend.

The newly released also will be given identification, a release plan and medical appointments, along with a new set of nonprison clothes. Local law enforcement and mental health officials will be notified about those who are released from prison and coming back to their communities. There also will be closer communication with parole officers. Donahue has scheduled many of these initiatives to begin Sept. 1.

"There are 592 offenders on parole in the six counties within this district," said Randy Focken, the state's director of parole services.

"We want the individuals being released to know we will work with them, but if they fail, there are consequences. We need your help by partnering with local programs."